

THE MEDIA

Out of the Cloister

The Christian Science Monitor has won three Pulitzer Prizes in the past four years and more than 100 different journalism awards over the past decade. For a long time, in fact, the Monitor has been the kind of newspaper that both laymen and professionals respect—but much less often read. Over the years since it was launched in 1908, the church-owned paper developed a reputation for narrow-mindedness and fusty conservatism, and with it a virtually static readership whose average age was nearly as old as the newspaper itself. Now, as eddies of social consciousness blow around the ultramodern building complex the Mother Church is erecting in Boston, an extra gust has reached the Monitor and whisked in a new editor—Welsh-born, English-educated John Hughes. A dynamic Pulitzer Prize-winning veteran of the paper's overseas staff, the 41-year-old Hughes was granted a blanket mandate by church elders to uncloister its editorial goals and to reach out, as he describes it, "to the poor, the blacks and all the others who were not included before."

Quick to accept the challenge, Hughes's first step last fall was to initiate a near-total reconstruction of the news staff. "The paper was suffering from hardening of the arteries," Hughes insists, "and looked prissily at the world through rose-colored glasses." He dismissed a number of old-timers, appointed three new senior editors, called in some tough old pros such as ABC's Joseph C. Harsch to bring new forcefulness to the editorial page and hired a crew of aggressive young reporters whom he immediately assigned to explore such youth-oriented topics as communes and hitchhiking. (Among those untouched by the Hughes scalpel was venerable political analyst Richard Strout—The New Republic's "T.R.B."—for 50 years a cornerstone of the Monitor's op-ed page.) "I've brought in people with a great sense of outreach," says Hughes, adding that he is not yet finished.

Deep: The major change that the genial, handsome editor has instilled in the Monitor's newsroom is a new sense of immediacy. Because 90 per cent of its readers receive their copies by mail, the paper's staff had long been accustomed to polishing stories with little regard to deadlines; as a result, most of the news coverage turned out to be ponderous background pieces, little more than lackluster supplements to the timely reporting of other dailies. All that has changed in the last eleven months. Says Hughes-appointed national news editor David K. Willis, 32: "Our correspondents have to be prepared to do what the wire

services do and then go into it much deeper—all in the same story."

In some respects, long-standing policy at the newspaper remains untouched: smoking is still barred in the newsroom and the paper runs no obituary columns. Nevertheless, one of the most notable realities about the "new" Monitor is the progressive disappearance of many antiquated strictures that date to the days when the paper was a proselytizing instrument of the church. Like other first-rank newspapers, the Monitor defied the government and printed excerpts from the Pentagon papers before the Supreme Court approved their publication. Even more stunning to old-line readers, the Hughes team ran blockbuster stories on the Manson murder trial and the Ali-Frazier fight, then followed with an aggressive editorial on the chief of the FBI, entitled "Hoover Must Go." Says up Hughes, himself a practicing Christian Scientist (a tacit requisite of all Monitor editors), "There is nothing we can't touch now."

Behind the vibrancy that has been suddenly injected into the Monitor lies an unspoken decision by the leaders of the Christian Science Church—which spent \$5 million last year subsidizing the paper—to enlarge advertising and circulation. And early indications are that the new policy appears to be working. Although the Monitor depends less than most national publications on advertising revenue (and does not release figures), ad income is up from a year ago. More important, circulation, which stood at 217,000 when Hughes took over, jumped 20 per cent in his first six months as editor to an estimated total of 260,000. "Our main thrust is to go after the young reader," says Hughes. "If we continued to try to build circulation on an aging readership, we would not have much of a future ahead of us."

And the hard-charging new editorial attitude coupled with promising gains in circulation has, not surprisingly, instilled an esprit de corps in the Monitor, both among the brash recruits and the savvy old-timers. "John Hughes is the freshest breeze this newsroom has felt in 60 years," says one veteran staffer. "We are going to have a newspaper that none of us dared dream about before."